

"A previously unknown individual"

The fight to save
James Hickman
in postwar Chicago

James Hickman
in the dock
DRAWING BY
BEN SHAHN



JAMES HICKMAN left for work at a local steel mill just before 9:00 p.m. on January 16, 1947. He was a thirty-nine-year-old African American and the father of seven children. The Hickmans lived in Chicago in difficult, overcrowded conditions in a tenement owned by their landlord, David Coleman, who was also African American. Sometime shortly after 11:30 p.m., Annie Hickman, James's wife, said she "heard paper popping" in the ceiling.¹ It was fire.

By
JOE ALLEN

Panic ensued. The one hallway leading out of their attic apartment was engulfed in flames. Charles, Annie and James's nineteen-year-old son, made a daring leap through the wall of fire and escaped, but the rest of the family was trapped. The only way out of the inferno was through the window; there were no fire escapes. Annie made it down to the second-floor windowsill with the help of another son, Willis. The crowd below placed a pile of blankets on the ground to cushion her fall and told Annie, dangling for her life, to let go. She hit the pile and survived.² Willis also jumped and survived. The fire, described by one Chicago firefighter as a "holocaust," killed four of the Hickman children.³ They were found underneath the bed with Leslie (fourteen), shielding the bodies of his younger siblings, Elvena (nine), Sylvester (seven), and Velvena (three).⁴

Hickman returned home the following morning to find his building gutted and his family gone. He recounted later that a neighbor approached him and broke the tragic news. "He said, 'Mr. Hickman, I hate to tell you this, four of your children is burnt to death.' And I weakened to the ground."⁵ Even though

he was distraught and wracked with pain, Hickman remembered a threat made by his landlord to burn out the tenants of his building if they didn't move.

Hickman found his family, buried his children, moved into a new apartment, and returned to work. But justice eluded him. "Paper was made to burn, coal and rags. Not people. People wasn't made to burn," he told his son.⁶ The police didn't seriously investigate the case. Coleman, his landlord, was a free man. Over the next six months, Hickman became increasingly depressed and frustrated. His family worried about his mental stability. On July 16, he picked up his .32 caliber pistol and went to confront Coleman at his home on the South Side of Chicago. He found Coleman sitting in a car outside his house and accused him of setting the fire. Hickman later claimed that Coleman admitted it. Hickman, a deeply religious man, raised his pistol, looked Coleman straight in the eye and said, "God is my secret judge,"⁷ and shot him four times. Coleman died three days later.

Police arrested James Hickman at his home and charged him with murder. State prosecutors sought the death penalty. The Hickman family saga could

Joe Allen is the author of Vietnam: The (Last) War the U.S. Lost (Haymarket, 2008), and has written several articles on criminal justice issues for the ISR.

have ended with another tragedy with James facing life in prison or execution by the state of Illinois. But a small group of revolutionary socialists in Chicago, members of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP),⁸ took the lead in putting together a vibrant community-based campaign that ultimately resulted in James Hickman going free. How did they accomplish this?

Jim Crow Chicago-style

James Hickman, like many African Americans during and immediately following the Second World War, came to Chicago to escape the grinding poverty of life in the rural Deep South. Hickman was born on February 19, 1907, near Louisville, Mississippi. His parents were sharecroppers, and at ten years old he went to work in the fields. When James was sixteen years old, he married Annie, who was his wife for the rest of his life. They had nine children together. His first goal after arriving in Chicago was to find a decent-paying job to support his large family. He eventually found one at International Harvester's Wisconsin Steel plant near the Indiana border. But finding decent housing for his family was another story.

Hickman searched for housing in Chicago when the overwhelmingly bulk of the city's growing African American population was still confined to a narrow sliver of land on the South Side of the city, starting at what was then called Twenty-Second Street (now called Cermak) and stretching to Sixty-Second Street between Wentworth and Cottage Grove Avenues. More than 60,000 Black workers came to Chicago from 1940 to 1944 seeking employment in war-related industries. This migration to Chicago continued after the war. "Between 1940 and 1950, Chicago's black population swelled by 214, 534," according to Chicago housing historian Arnold Hirsch, bringing it to a total of 492, 265.⁹ The boundaries of the ghetto were walled off by restrictive "covenants"—deals between white homeowners and larger institutions, which stipulated that only whites could buy homes in certain areas.

In 1927, the Chicago Real Estate Board began promoting racially restrictive covenants to YMCAs, churches, women's clubs, the many chambers of commerce, and property owners' associations as a way of "protecting" the value of their property from incoming Black families. This racist housing policy was backed by the city and by the policies of the federal government. It is believed that by the mid-1940s as much as 80 percent of Chicago's residential housing was covered by restrictive covenants of one kind or another. The Supreme Court in 1948 ruled that restrictive covenants were unconstitutional, the year following the Hickman case, though little would change for many years.

The available housing for Blacks in Chicago was confined almost entirely to the South Side ghetto, leading to massive overcrowding. A small enclave of Blacks was beginning to grow on the West Side of the city, but it was plagued by the same problems that residents struggled with on the South Side. In many cases, Black landlords were as guilty as white landlords of making money hand over fist by cutting up apartments into smaller and smaller units called "kitchenettes." This cute-sounding word really meant a dilapidated one-room apartment. According to Hirsch, "The Chicago Community Inventory estimated

that there were at least 80,000 such 'conversions' between 1940 and 1950."¹⁰ Nicholas Lemann, in his history of Black migration to Chicago, *The Promised Land*, vividly describes the kitchenettes as "rickety three-story tenements... with heating, plumbing, and insulation that were rudimentary at best and often completely non-functional."¹¹ Yet, there was little to no options for Black families seeking shelter. The housing crunch for Blacks was made worse by returning veterans. Blacks faced white violence when they tried to move into predominately white communities.¹² This is how Jim Crow worked in Chicago. This is also how James Hickman met David Coleman.

A dangerous man

David Coleman was also from the South and came to Chicago in 1943 with ambitions to be a businessman. Coleman met a woman in July 1946 with a building to sell at 1733 West Washburne, on the West Side of Chicago; he leased it from her shortly thereafter.¹³ In effect, he had day-to-day control of the property and he collected the rent.

In the middle of August 1946, Hickman heard that an apartment was available at Coleman's building, which was subdivided into kitchenettes. Coleman first showed him the basement apartment for \$50 a month. Hickman later told journalist John Bartlow Martin, "The water was half a leg deep in the basement...no windows, no lights, no nothing in there."¹⁴ Hickman declined the basement "apartment," but Coleman quickly offered him an attic apartment for \$6 a week until the space on the second floor became free. "We walked up the stairs, it was so dark," Hickman later testified, "we almost had to feel our way...I am walking around looking at it, I don't like this. She [Annie] said, I don't neither, but surely we can stay here because we ain't got no place."¹⁵ It was a small attic that adults could barely stand up in, and there was no electricity, no gas, and only one window. But they needed shelter for their children. So, despite their reservations, the Hickmans told Coleman that they would take the attic "apartment" with the expectation that the second-floor apartment would be theirs soon. They gave Coleman \$100 as a down payment.

Days turned to weeks and still there was no word from Coleman on the promised apartment. Finally, Hickman confronted Coleman in mid-September 1946 and demanded back his \$100 deposit so he could look for another place. Coleman refused. "I won't pay you until I get ready," Coleman barked at Hickman. In return, Hickman said he would take him to court. Hickman recalled that Coleman threatened to burn him out. "He said he had a man on the East Side ready to burn the place up if...I had him arrested."¹⁶ The Hickmans swore out a warrant for Coleman's arrest, but the police didn't arrest him.

This wasn't the first time that Coleman threatened to burn his building. The previous fall, tenants in Coleman's building stopped contractors (who showed up with no notice) from further cutting up their apartments into smaller units. Coleman appeared at the scene and tenants told him that he would have to go to court to evict them. He declared, "I am the owner, I don't have to go to court to do that, I will get everybody out of here when I want if it takes fire."¹⁷

Coleman was clearly a dangerous man, but the city au-

thorities did nothing. In fact, the coroner's jury that heard testimony concerning the death of the Hickman children could not decide if the fire was accidental or deliberate, and recommended that the state's attorney initiate an investigation into it. No serious investigation was done. In the end, Coleman was fined by the city authorities for a series of safety and health violations—totaling \$450—the equivalent of \$112.50 a piece for each of the dead Hickman children.¹⁸

"We got there first"

Soon after Hickman shot and mortally wounded Coleman, he returned home and waited for the police to arrest him. He offered no resistance and confessed to the murder of David Coleman. While in jail, Hickman was interviewed by two of the most important newspapers in Chicago, the *Chicago Daily Defender*, the leading Black newspaper in Chicago, and the *Chicago Daily Tribune*. But by far the best piece of journalism on Hickman was written by Robert Birchman for *The Militant*, the weekly newspaper of the Socialist Workers Party, who laid out the case. "The story of Hickman is the story of negligence and callous disregard of housing and health conditions. It is the story of the horrible slums in which the Negro people are forced to live in dilapidated, disease-ridden fire-traps," wrote Birchman. "It is the most tragic of many calamities in which 22 persons have lost their lives, many others suffered injuries and hundreds made homeless as a result of fires in Chicago's Negro ghettos since the first of the year."¹⁹ Shortly after Birchman's interview with Hickman, M.J. Myer, a Chicago labor attorney and co-counsel in the (historically important, but largely forgotten) Minneapolis sedition trial of American Trotskyists in 1941, became lead counsel for Hickman.²⁰ Myer released a statement shortly after the coroner's inquest into Coleman's death, that read in part, "In Hickman's mind all evidence pointed to Coleman's responsibility for the burning to death of his four children. This idea has obsessed him until it reached a point where he no longer could control himself."²¹ Myer also announced that a defense committee was being formed on Hickman's behalf. Two other attorneys joined Myer—Leon Despres, then a counsel for the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and soon to be a famous Chicago alderman, and William H. Temple, an African American criminal defense attorney and a member of the Chicago National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) executive board, giving Hickman an effective legal team.²² They all agreed to represent him without compensation.

How did the SWP get involved in the case so rapidly? They had 150 members in the greater Chicago area, whereas the Stalinist Communist Party (CP), by far the dominant group on the U.S. left, had easily ten times that number, if not more. "We got there first, not the Communist Party, because our members were involved in the neighborhood in tenant rights," longtime socialist Frank Fried explained in a telephone interview. "They were members of the West Side Tenants' Union." Fried had just left the navy and was active in the liberal American Veterans Committee; he would become a leader of the SWP-initiated Hickman Defense Committee.²³

Immediately following the fire, the tenants in Coleman's building organized themselves into the Chicago Area Tenants Union, in which members of the SWP were actively involved.²⁴ The driving force behind the tenants' union was the Chicago SWP organizer, Milt Zaslow (who went by the public name of Mike Bartell) and his partner Edith. "The tenants' rights organization began in the building where Milt, Edith and their son lived," wrote Karin Baker and Patrick Quinn in 1997 obituary of Zaslow/Bartell. "The group pushed for improved living conditions, among other demands. At one time, a renters' strike developed that involved thousands in the city of Chicago. The campaign got so big that people in distant neighborhoods were calling them, wanting to get involved."²⁵

The SWP also benefited from the revival of civil rights activism following the end of the war. The Congress for Racial Equality (CORE), which was founded in 1941 at the University of Chicago and pioneered many of the tactics that became mainstays of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, took the lead in the fight against Jim Crow in Chicago. "Chicago CORE, after a year of inactivity, was revived in the autumn of 1945 under the chairmanship of the Black schoolteacher and NAACP leader, Gerald Bullock. Finding few members interested in action, he dropped the chapter's rigid selection procedures and made a broad appeals for new members to which the Trotskyist SWP responded," according to historians Meier and Rudwick.²⁶

Gerald Bullock would later play an important part in Hickman's defense. An SWP member became the editor of the local *Chicago CORE-News*. One of the most successful campaigns of CORE, involving SWP members, was the campaign to desegregate the aptly named White City Skating Rink in 1946. "Although it was located in the predominantly African American part of the city, only whites were allowed in certain areas of the park, such as the roller rink. The SWP under Milt's leadership was central in implementing a broad-based campaign that broke the color barrier at White City."²⁷ Frank Fried recalls, "Mike was an organizer's organizer. He got up every day and read the four daily newspapers, and looked for things to get involved in."²⁸ The Hickman case was one of them. Leon Despres deeply believed that, "but for Mike, James Hickman would have been convicted."²⁹

"Will you help us?"

Working quickly, SWP activists put together a Hickman Defense Committee on August 8, 1947. The focus of its work was, according to Fried, "to make it politically impossible in the eyes of the people of Chicago for the prosecutors to convict Hickman, to put as much pressure that could be mobilized on the city, and take the case national to pressure the state and the city."³⁰ The committee received support from the Chicago Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) Industrial Union Council, the American Federation of Labor Building services employees union, the American Veterans Committee, and the Baptist Ministers Conference of Chicago. A public appeal for Hickman was signed by Willoughby Abner, first vice president of the Chicago CIO Council and chair of the Hickman Defense Committee; Charles Chiakulous, pres-



Tenement housing in Chicago's South Side, around 1946

ident of the UAW-CIO Local 477; and Bernis Johnson, chair of the West Side NAACP Youth Council.

Abner was important to the defense campaign because of his stature as a leading Black trade unionist in the UAW in the Chicago area. According to historian Nelson Lichtenstein, Abner "organized thousands during the war in several South Side foundries and small manufacturing facilities."³¹ Sidney Lens, a local trade union official, who later became a nationally known historian and antiwar leader during the Vietnam War, also played a central role in Hickman's defense campaign.³² "We put a collection can for donations, a petition, and leaflets about Hickman in every store, bar, or restaurant we could in the Black neighborhoods in Chicago," says Fried. "People gave generously. Everybody knew about Hickman. I think the prosecution was screwed from the beginning."³³

Why was the Hickman cause so popular? The reasons were explained in an article written on the case for the journal *Fourth International* some time before Hickman's trial. "Every so often a previously unknown individual suddenly attracts wide attention. There is usually a social reason for this. The story connected with the particular case epitomizes the plight of voiceless millions, focusing on the needs of one group and the crimes of another, bringing into the light of day the festering rottenness of class society.... Hickman's story is the story of Jim Crow as it is practiced north of the Mason-Dixon line."³⁴ The tragedy of James Hickman personified the plight of Chicago's Black community.

Seeking to organize a large public display of support for James Hickman and his family, the defense campaign organized rallies at several churches across Chicago. The largest rally was held on September 28, 1947, at the Metropolitan Community Church on Chicago's South Side. To build the rally, the campaign put up "hundreds of

posters announcing the event," canvassed the area with "two sound trucks," and handed out "40,000 leaflets."³⁵ More than 1,200 people attended with the overwhelmingly African American audience unanimously passing a resolution calling for Hickman's release.³⁶ The featured speaker at the rally was actress Tallulah Bankhead, who starred in Alfred Hitchcock's *Lifeboat* and was a member of a powerful Democratic Party family from Alabama. Her father had been speaker of the House of Representatives in the late 1930s, but she broke with her family over the conservatism of the Southern Democrats, particularly their virulent racism. Her involvement in the Hickman campaign was something of a coup for Sidney Lens. He recalled three decades later:

I was leaving my office on Dearborn Street one evening when I noticed her name on the marquis half a block away. She was starring in a new play. On the spur of the moment, I went to the stage door and asked for her. To my surprise, she knew about Hickman and was immensely sympathetic. When I asked her, however, to speak at the rally we planned at the Metropolitan Community Church, she shuddered as if I hit her with a blast of arctic air. "Why, Mr. Lens, how can I make a speech?" It took a while to figure out that what she meant was that while she was capable of reciting other people's lines, she was incapable of constructing a speech on her own. I agreed therefore to write a speech for her, and a couple of days later she advised that "I read it to my secretary and made her cry. I'll be happy to deliver it."³⁷

Bankhead, according to Lens, "drew tears from the whole audience, a couple of thousand people"³⁸ with a riveting speech:

It seems to me a shameful condemnation of our society that 2,000 years after Christ, people are still herded together into Black ghettos merely because their skins

have different pigmentations than other people. No one condones murder or any act of violence. I hope the day shall come soon when humanity can resolve not only its racial problems but all problems coolly and rationally; when emotional acts of violence—be they individual or national—can be eliminated. So long, however, as there exists anywhere on earth one minority that is treated with contempt, that is herded into Black slum areas, that is abused and insulted, so long will we have violence, hate, brutality, savagery. So long as there exists a Jewish problem, or a Mexican problem—or a problem of any minority—so long will one form of violence beget another. I am proud to be one of the humble gladiators in this struggle against narrow prejudice and stupidity. I am glad to lend my efforts so that there shall be no more James Hickman tragedies.³⁹

Other speakers that night included the best-selling African American author Willard Motley, and Chicago packinghouse union official Philip Weightman.⁴⁰ Hickman's attorney, M.J. Myer, roared to the crowd, "It is not Hickman who should be on trial, but the inhuman landlords and real-estate interests who sacrifice human lives for profit, for they are the real criminals. They are the people who should be put behind bars and kept there."⁴¹ The

Communist Party, which could have contributed significant resources to the Hickman campaign, refused to participate and stood outside the Hickman defense rally handing out a pamphlet, *The Great Conspiracy* by Albert Kahn, attacking the SWP and repeating old slanders that Trotskyism and fascism were in league against the Soviet Union.⁴²

Motley, author of the 1947 best-selling novel *Knock on Any Door*, which was made into a film starring Humphrey Bogart in 1949, played an incredibly important part in the Hickman defense campaign.⁴³ He had a huge reputation at the time of the case. His book sold 47,000 copies during its first three weeks in print and a total of 350,000 during the next two years.⁴⁴ Motley's involvement opened many doors for supporters of Hickman. However, the one door that Motley could not open was to the *Chicago Sun* (soon to be the *Sun-Times*). The Chicago-based author met Hickman in prison and wrote an eloquent appeal that the defense committee attempted to publish in the *Chicago Sun*, one of the largest circulating newspapers in the Midwest. The *Sun's* owner, Marshall Field, heir to the Field family fortune and a publicly identified liberal, refused to print Motley's appeal even after the defense committee was prepared to pay for the space.⁴⁵ Motley pub-

HICKMAN DEFENSE RALLY

• •
Sunday,
Sept. 28
3:00 P.M.

• •
**Metropolitan
Community Church**
41st & So. Parkway

• •
Speakers:

TALLULAH BANKHEAD
Radio, Stage and Screen Star

RALPH HELSTEIN
Int'l Pres., United Packinghouse
Workers of America

WILLARD MOTLEY
Author of "Knock on Any Door"

HELP FREE James Hickman!



This is a picture of Mr. and Mrs. Hickman and three of their four children: Elvina, 9; Sylvester, 7; and Velvina, 3. Shortly after this picture was taken these three children and Leslie, 14 were trapped in the flaming attic and burned to death.

WHO IS JAMES HICKMAN?

James Hickman is in jail awaiting trial for murder. He brought his family here from the south in search of security and happiness. He found no happiness. He didn't even find a home. An unscrupulous landlord, David Coleman took \$100.00 from him and crammed his family of nine into a tiny attic cubicle without water, lights, gas or protection from fire. James Hickman said "We lived like rats in a hole." Then Coleman ordered his tenants out, so he could divide the "apartments" into "kitchenettes" and make more money. When they refused to go, he threatened to burn them out.

One night while Hickman was working, the attic was swept by flames. His four youngest children were burned alive. This was more agony than any man could stand. So James Hickman took a gun and killed David Coleman.

THERE ARE MILLIONS OF JAMES HICKMANS

licly attacked Field for his hypocrisy. He is one of those "rich liberals...who talk out of both sides of their mouths."⁴⁶ The defense committee had Motley's appeal circulated to many of the largest Black newspapers in the country, including the *Chicago Defender*. Motley didn't hold back his feelings about the Hickman case:

You have seen many pictures of men who have killed. You have seen the photographs of the returned soldier. Perhaps next door lives a boy who killed some other boy during the war. In the war millions of men killed other millions of men because they believed they were a threat to their homes, their wives, their children. This threat was thousands of miles from home. These were strangers killed, with whom there had been no personal contact. James Hickman killed the man who had threatened his wife and children with a death more horrible than the Nazi gas chambers. And carried it out. This is what I was thinking of as I sat talking to Hickman today. Hickman needs help. There are three children left who need him. A wife who needs him. Will you help us help him?⁴⁷

"This man has paid enough"

The defense campaign scored a major victory when the state's attorney's office announced on the eve of the trial that it was dropping its demand for the death penalty. This changed the whole atmosphere surrounding the trial. Leon Despres, co-counsel for Hickman, said that it made the trial "less edgy."⁴⁸ It was also a backhanded admission that the pressure of the defense campaign was working. James Hickman went on trial for the murder of David Coleman on November 5 before a white judge and an all-white jury in the Cook County Criminal Court building. The presiding judge was Rudolph Desort, the prosecutor was Assistant State's Attorney Samuel Friedman, and M.J. Myer was the lead counsel for the defense. The prosecution presented a total of eight witnesses that included four policemen and Coleman's half-brother, Percy Brown, who under cross-examination gave testimony that reportedly contradicted statements he had made earlier to the police.⁴⁹

In his opening statements, Myer argued that Hickman was not guilty because he was "temporarily insane" at the time of the shooting of David Coleman. Myer placed the blame for Coleman's shooting on the terrible living conditions in Coleman's building and the death of the Hickmans' four children. Myer called witnesses that testified to Coleman's previous threats to burn the tenants out of the building and James's anguished state of mind following the fire and deaths.⁵⁰ Two psychiatrists testified for the defense. Dr. Boris M. Ury interviewed Hickman, while he was incarcerated at Cook County Jail. Hickman spoke about the divinely inspired "mission" of his dead children's lives. "I see the future in these four was destroyed. They would have been great people had they lived. I had a vision, but their lives was cut off." Dr. Ury's report went on: "Client continued to discuss the grandiose 'mission' of his children: 'The Lord had work for them to do. He had picked them out...' Examiner [Ury] inquired whether this godly mission would be confined to work among the colored people, but he was assured by his client that the mission would be applicable to all people." Dr. Ury concluded his report by saying that Hickman shot Coleman "in a schizoid, disassociated state, feeling

he was accomplishing the Lord's will."⁵¹

Leon Despres considered James Hickman's testimony in court "magnificent"⁵² and, at times, "poetic."⁵³ Hickman sat solemnly in the witness chair and wore a modest gray suit with a white flower in his lapel, according to *Chicago Daily News* reporter John Culhane, who pieced together the courtroom scene from interviews with Leon Despres and access to Despres' case files for an article he wrote in the mid-1960s.

"This was God fixed this," Hickman testified.

I had raised these children up and God knowed that vow I made to him...that these children was a generation to be raised up. God wasn't pleased what happened to them....

I had two sons and two daughters who would some day be great men and women, some day they would have married, some day they would have been fathers and mothers of children. These children would have children and these children would children and another generation of Hickmans could raise up and enjoy peace.⁵⁴

The trial lasted nine days. On November 15, after nineteen hours of deliberation, the jury informed the judge that they couldn't reach a decision. It was a classic "hung jury"—seven to five for acquittal. The state's attorney's office initially declared that it would retry James Hickman the following January. But it soon reversed itself and announced that it was dropping the murder charge and recommending to the judge that Hickman be sentenced to two years probation if he pleaded guilty to manslaughter. He agreed and walked out of court a free man on December 16, 1947. Hickman had served a total of five months in jail. Samuel Freedman, the prosecuting attorney, said that one of the major reasons that his office didn't want a retrial was the public support for Hickman from across the country as he held up letters of support for Hickman. "They are too numerous to read all of them here," Freedman declared holding up a fistful of letters, resolutions and telegrams, "but the general opinion is to the effect that mercy ought to be shown to an individual who, under the stress of the loss of four children, has been punished to such an extent that society can be magnanimous and afford him a chance to return to his remaining children and his wife, and spend the rest of his lifetime in peace."⁵⁵ Though he admitted "some quarters" would disagree with his recommendation,⁵⁶ Freedman concluded, "The state feels this man has paid enough with the loss of his children."⁵⁷

"A chain of personal memories"

The Hickman family returned to their private lives after the trial. But within a year, the case received its widest publicity (outside of Chicago) when *Harper's* magazine commissioned renowned journalist John Bartlow Martin to write a story on the Hickman case. Martin's writings would today be called "true crime," but that would be a great disservice to them. They were neither lurid nor exploitative, as many true crime works are. Martin's writing style combined the best techniques of a novelist and a journalist with the motivation of a socially conscious liberal. In his autobiography, written many decades after the Hickman case, he recounts how he approached writing the "The Hickman story":

In preparing to do the piece, I read Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma* and other books, but only for my own background information—I wrote the piece almost entirely from interviews, especially interviews with Hickman and his wife and with the landlord's relatives, I simply told the story of Hickman's and the landlord's lives and their world—the world below.⁵⁸

The “world below” was one of racism and poverty that greeted Black refugees from the Deep South. “I wanted to do not an article, crammed with demographers’ statistics, but, rather, a story about a man. James Hickman had been a sharecropper in Mississippi. He was deeply religious and deeply devoted to his children.”⁵⁹ Martin’s article is great writing and deserves to be read by everyone committed to social justice today.

But what lifts the story from the page is the illustrations of the Hickman case by the great American artist, Ben Shahn. Shahn’s name is not one that many Americans would recognize, but millions have seen his work, particularly his drawings of the martyred anarchists, Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, and the three murdered civil rights activists, Michael Schwerner, James Chaney, and Andrew Goodman. Shahn’s drawings of the Hickman case that hung on the east wall of Leon Despres’ old law office caught the eye of reporter John Culhane, prompting him to write one of the few profiles of the case to appear in the decades that followed the trial. Shahn later wrote of his own struggle to capture the enormity of the Hickman family tragedy:

I was asked to make drawings for the story and, after several discussions with the writer, felt that I had gained enough of the feel of the situation to proceed. I examined a great deal of the factual visual material, and then I discarded all of it. It seemed to me the implications of this event transcended the immediate story; there was universality about man’s dread of fire, and his sufferings from fire. There was a universality in the pity which such a disaster invokes, had its overtones. And the relentless poverty which had pursued this man, and which dominated the story, had its own kind of universality.⁶⁰

He continues:

Sometimes, if one is particularly satisfied with a piece of work which he has completed, he may say to himself, “well done,” and go on to something else. Not in this instance, however. I found that I could not dismiss the

event about which I had made drawings—the so-called “Hickman Story.”... I had some curious sense of responsibility about it, a sort of personal involvement.⁶¹

The Hickman tragedy “aroused in me,” Shahn recalled, “a chain of personal memories.”

There were two great fires in my own childhood, one only colorful, the other disastrous and unforgettable. Of the first, I remember only that the Russian village in which my grandfather lived burned, and I was there. I remember the excitement, the flames breaking out everywhere... The other fire left its mark upon me and all my family, and left scars on my father’s hand and face, for he had clambered up a drainpipe and taken each of my brothers and sisters and me over the house one by one, burning himself painfully in the process. Meanwhile our house and all belongings were consumed, and my parents stricken beyond their power to recover.⁶²

The most powerful of all of Shahn’s Hickman drawings is the four huddled, deceased children. His “personal involvement” led him to use his own siblings as the basis for the drawing. “They resemble much more closely my own brothers and sisters.”⁶³ John Bartlow Martin’s story and Ben Shahn’s drawings remain the most powerful documents from that era of the Hickman case. Unfortunately, the Hickman trial transcript disappeared many decades ago along with much of the paperwork related to Hickman’s legal defense. The Sidney Lens Papers at the Chicago Historical Society has some of the Hickman defense campaign literature, fliers, and a brochure—just enough to give one a feel for the campaign.

“Dismiss it in a sentence or two”

Despite all of this, one has to ask, how can such a powerful story disappear from the public memory? This is an amazing story, not only of rapacious greed and racism that led to an excruciatingly painful family tragedy, but also the triumph of justice over very long odds. It didn’t take place in some remote part of the country, but played out in Chicago, whose crime-obsessed, tabloid press salivated over stories of much less interest. There were several things working against the Hickman case getting the recognition that it deserved. The case took place in 1947; over the next few years the death-grip of the Cold War would tighten around U.S. society. A virulent level of repression would drive social-

Recommended from Haymarket



The Communist Manifesto BY PHIL GASPER

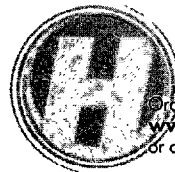
Gasper’s fully annotated edition of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels’ classic also includes explanatory essays and excerpts from other works by Marx and Engels, making this the best introduction to Marxist thought to be published in decades.

\$10

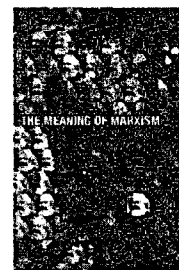
The Meaning of Marxism BY PAUL D’AMATO

Long considered dead by mainstream critics, the basic ideas of Karl Marx are brought to life in this overview of his thought. Marx’s ideas of globalization, oppression and social change are more important than ever.

\$12



Order online at
www.haymarketbooks.org
or call (773) 583-7884.





Mike Myers, William Temple, Sidney Lens, Leon Despres, Willoughby Abners, Charlie Chiakulous, Mike Bartell. Mrs. Hickman is in front

ists, communists, and radicals of various allegiances to the margins of American society. In many ways, the campaign to save James Hickman was one of the last echoes of the great radicalization of the American working class of the 1930s and 1940s. A successful political campaign to free an African American man who shot and killed his landlord led by revolutionary socialists is not the type of story to be embraced during the height of the American Century. The Hickman case was simply steamrolled over by a decade and half of political repression and cultural conformity. This, however, is only a part of the answer.

The other part lies in who writes the history of the American left. By and large, they were historians who were members of the Communist Party and the New Left of the 1960s, few of whom have shown any interest or political sympathy for Trotskyism in this country in the 1930s and 1940s. "Trotskyism has been written out of the history of the American left," notes veteran revolutionary socialist Joel Geier. There are notable exceptions, such as Alan Wald's *The New York Intellectuals* or Bryan Palmer's *James P. Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left 1890-1928*, but too often the most popular left-wing histories of the 1930s and 1940s simply dismiss, denigrate, or outright censure the role of Trotskyists in the radical movement.

One of the worst examples of this is *Labor's Untold Story* by Richard O. Boyer and Herbert M. Morais, published by the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America (UE), one of the unions of the CIO era that was led by the CP.⁶⁴ It ignores the Trotskyist-led great Minneapolis Teamster strikes of 1934. It was the strikes in Minneapolis, Toledo, and San Francisco that directly led to the formation of the CIO. This type of censorship may be extreme, but not uncommon. This includes the 1941 trial

of the Trotskyists of the SWP for "subversion" under the reactionary Smith Act that became the model for the trials that destroyed the CP after the Second World War. Yet, as Ellen Schrecker in her *Many Are The Crimes: McCarthyism in America* notes, "There is little scholarship on the Trotskyist Smith Act case. While recognizing its implications for the later Smith Act cases, most writers tend to dismiss it in a sentence or two."⁶⁵ Instead of "dismissing it in a sentence or two," it's time that Trotskyism receive the proper recognition it deserves in American radical history.⁶⁶

There are many stories such as the Hickman case that need to be recovered from oblivion and retold. Last year Clint Eastwood's film *Changeling* was released. Set in 1928 Los Angeles, it told the real-life story of Christine Collins and her search for the truth behind the kidnapping of her son and the mind-boggling public relations stunt by the Los Angeles Police Department, which sent her the wrong child and then attempted to shut her up when she refused to play along. It led to an explosion of public protest. The story disappeared from public memory for eight decades until screenwriter J. Michael Straczynski, a former journalist, was contacted by an old source at Los Angeles City Hall, who told him that the city was planning to destroy some of its archives and that there was "something [Straczynski] should see."⁶⁷ This turned out to be a transcript of a city council hearing of Collins's case. There are thousands of stories of injustice and struggle hidden away in the archives of city halls around the country. Hopefully, younger historians can bring to light many of these stories before they are lost to history.

I would like to extend a special thank-you to two people, Frank Fried and Leon Despres. Frank first told me about the Hickman case at Joel Geier's seventieth birthday party in May 2008, and Leon Despres, now

deceased, allowed me to discuss the case with him at his Hyde Park residence. Patrick Quinn has been extremely helpful in tracking down important sources of information on the case and commenting on the first draft of this article. I also want to thank the Chicago Historical Society for allowing me access to the Sidney Lens papers, and the Library of Congress for access to the Hickman files in John Bartlow Martin's papers. The librarians in charge of the Willard Motley papers at Northeastern Illinois University were very helpful, but I ended up referencing different material on Motley's role in the Hickman case.

- 1 John Bartlow Martin, "The Hickman story," *Harper's*, August 1948, 39.
- 2 "Probe tenement fire after four children die," *Chicago Times*, January 17, 1947.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Martin, "The Hickman story," 40.
- 6 Martin, "The Hickman story," 47.
- 7 Ibid., 48.
- 8 The SWP was founded in 1938 as the main revolutionary socialist (Trotskyist) group in the United States. Today it is little more than a cult around its longtime leader Jack Barnes.
- 9 Arnold R. Hirsch, *Making of the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago 1940-1960* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998) 16. Hirsch's book is the only history of housing in Chicago that mentions the Hickman case.
- 10 Ibid., 25.
- 11 Nicholas Lemann, *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How it Changed America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991), 65.
- 12 Adam Cohen and Elizabeth Taylor, *American Pharaoh, Mayor Richard J. Daley: His Battle for Chicago and the Nation* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2000), 77-79.
- 13 African Americans found it virtually impossible to get traditional mortgages because of the racist policies of bankers backed by the federal government. This led to the highly exploitative system of "contract buying," especially in Chicago where Blacks paid astronomical rates for decaying property that could be easily taken from them and resold for greater profits. For a full discussion of this see Beryl Satter, *Family Properties: Race, Real Estate, and the Exploitation of Black Urban America* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2009).
- 14 Martin, "The Hickman story," 44.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Ibid., 45.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Robert L. Birchman, "Grief-stricken tenant shoots landlord for fire-death of 4," *The Militant*, August 4, 1947.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 See James P. Cannon, *Socialism on Trial* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1973).
- 21 Birchman, "Grief-stricken tenant shoots landlord."
- 22 See Leon Depres, *Challenging the Daley Machine: A Chicago Alderman's Memoir* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2005).
- 23 Interview by author with Frank Fried by telephone, November 20, 2008.
- 24 Birchman, "Grief-stricken tenant shoots landlord."
- 25 Karin Baker and Patrick M. Quinn, "A lifetime for socialism," *Against the Current* 71, November-December 1997, www.solidarity-us.org/node/833.
- 26 August Meier and Elliot Rudwick, *CORE: A Study in the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 32.
- 27 Baker and Quinn, "A lifetime for socialism."
- 28 Interview with Frank Fried, November 20, 2008.
- 29 Baker and Quinn.
- 30 Interview with Frank Fried, March 22, 2009.
- 31 Nelson Lichtenstein, *Walter Reuther: The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit* (Urbana, Illinois: The University of Illinois Press, 1997), 377.
- 32 Sidney Lens, *Unrepentant Radical: An American Activist's Account of Five Turbulent Decades* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1980), 150-55.
- 33 Interview with Frank Fried, March 22, 2009.
- 34 "The case of James Hickman," *Fourth International*, September-October 1947, Vol.8, No.8, www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspaper/fi/vol08/no08/hickman.htm.
- 35 Letter from Sidney Lens to Tallulah Bankhead, September 26, 1947, from the Sidney Lens Papers at the Chicago Historical Society.
- 36 Frank Fried remembers the audience being about 80 percent Black. E-mail to author from Fried, March 25, 2009.
- 37 Lens, *Unrepentant Radical*, 153.
- 38 Ibid. There are discrepancies concerning the attendance at the rally. *The Militant* reported at the time 1,200. Lens writes of "thousands" but his autobiography was written three decades after the event, while Frank Fried remembers that the church could hold 4,500 and was "packed." I've decided to use the figure from *The Militant* simply because it was the closest reporting to the time of the actual event.
- 39 "Liberal labor figures come to aid of Hickman," *The Militant*, October 13, 1947.
- 40 "Seek freedom for slayer of his landlord," *Chicago Daily Defender*, September 29, 1947.
- 41 "Hickman's freedom sought in Chicago," *The Militant*, October 6, 1947.
- 42 Ibid.
- 43 According to Wikipedia, "The *Chicago Defender* published some of Motley's fiction when he was only thirteen years old, launching him on his career as a writer. He was soon writing a weekly column for young readers called 'Bud Says' under the pseudonym 'Bud Billikin' (Chicago still holds an annual Bud Billiken Parade and Picnic)," http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Willard_Motley.
- 44 Information on books sales was found in Robert E. Fleming's introduction to *Knock on Any Door* (DeKalb, Illinois: Northern Illinois University Press, 1989), ix.
- 45 "The case of James Hickman."
- 46 Motley quoted in "Hickman's freedom sought in Chicago."
- 47 Willard Motley, "Hickman Needs Your Help, Says Novelist After Interview in Jail," *The Militant*, September 22, 1947.
- 48 Interview with Leon Depres by author on November 11, 2008. Depres died on May 6, 2009, at the age of 101.
- 49 "Trial of James Hickman nears climax in Chicago," *The Militant*, November 12, 1947.
- 50 Ibid.
- 51 John Culhane, "Your children is burnt to death," *Chicago Daily News*, John Bartlow Martin papers, Library of Congress, box 114. There is no date on the clipping.
- 52 Ibid.
- 53 Interview with Leon Depres by author.
- 54 Culhane, "Your children is burnt to death."
- 55 Ibid.
- 56 "Hickman is saved; Free on probation," *The Militant*, December, 22, 1947.
- 57 "Fire 'avenger' freed," *Daily Times*, December 16, 1947.
- 58 John Bartlow Martin, *It Seems Like Only Yesterday* (New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc., 1986), 83. *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* was a 1944 study of race relations authored by Swedish economist Gunnar Myrdal and funded by the Carnegie Foundation.
- 59 Martin, *It Seems Like Only Yesterday*, 82.
- 60 Ben Shahn, *The Shape of Content* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1957), 26.
- 61 Ibid., 28.
- 62 Ibid., 29-30.
- 63 Ibid., 33.
- 64 See Richard O. Boyer and Herbert M. Morais, *Labor's Untold Story* (New York: United Electrical Workers, 1955).
- 65 Ellen Schrecker, *Many Are The Crimes: McCarthyism* (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1998), 458. See her comments on the 1941 Smith Act trial in footnote 49.
- 66 When the author refers to Trotskyism in the U.S., he is referring to the broad currents of it in the 1930s and 1940s that included both the Socialist Workers Party and the Workers Party. In this period both organizations were the closest to the classical Marxism that this journal ascribes to.
- 67 See Joe Allen, "To serve and protect?," *Socialist Worker*, November 6, 2008, socialistworker.org/2008/11/06/to-serve-and-protect.